How to Run a Collaborative Incubator

An incubator is not a conference, it's not a training course or a summer school, it's not an opportunity to teach people about the latest research. An incubator is about enabling and encouraging people to develop new research ideas through bringing them together, breaking down hierarchies and fostering collaboration.

What is a Collaborative Incubator?

A collaborative incubator is an academic workshop that brings diverse participants together to explore research challenges. An incubator is designed to actively encourage the learning and development of new research ideas between people who may not have interacted otherwise.

Incubators provide an inclusive and accessible environment for senior academics to work alongside postgraduate students and other early-career academics, potentially with industrial partners or other stakeholders, to frame or solve exciting new academic research problems.

The inclusive environment has multiple benefits: early career researchers are more involved, while senior academics see how more diverse teams can be beneficial for their research. And it leads to concrete outputs: new

Incubator terminology: Group *vs* Team

Group: people pre-selected by organisers for initial discussion of the presented challenge (usually designed to bring diversity of experience and knowledge).
Team: self-organised collection of people working on formulating approaches to the challenge over a longer-period.

approaches to tackle high-impact challenges, research collaborations, grant applications, PhD projects, and more.

Key features:

- 3 to 5 (ideally 5) days in a venue relatively free of distractions – i.e. not next to participants' offices.
- A diverse mix of 30 to 50 participants: this includes characteristics such as gender and ethnicity but also career stage (postgraduate students, postdocs, academic staff and industry representatives if appropriate) and expertise.
- 5-8 speakers who are well briefed to deliver short (approx. 20 minute) introductions to stimulate discussion around open problems and future collaborations.
- Challenges with no pre-defined approach, that level the playing field enabling students and more senior academic staff to work together to tackle the issues.
- A dedicated academic lead and research theme (often inter-disciplinary themes work best), with organisational support provided by others as required.

Incubators are good for:

- Kick-starting new multidisciplinary areas of research or finding transformative ideas.
- Bringing together people who wouldn't normally meet and providing time and space to develop research collaborations.
- Creating an inclusive, supportive and fun environment for established academics to work with PhD students and early career researchers.
- Delivering excellent future research outcomes - e.g. papers, co-funded PhD studentships, and successful grant proposals.

About this Guidance

This guide is based on evidence gathered from a project run by researchers at the University of Bath as part of the EPSRC "Inclusion Matters" programme. It describes how to organise an inclusive workshop based around collaborative research, rather than the traditional speaker-audience format.

Not everyone will want to, or be able to, deliver the exact format outlined here, but these are good general principles in delivering inclusive, open, collaborative events.

Running such an event does need slightly more work from the organisers. The aim of this guide is to provide a clear plan. It is worthwhile for participants and rewarding for organisers to put in this extra effort.

Running an Incubator - Guiding Principles

- Longer incubators lasting 4- or 5-days work better because they provide time and space for participants to get to know each other and gain confidence working together.
- A significant proportion of time in an incubator is set aside for unstructured teamwork. This is a great way to foster collaboration and break down barriers and hierarchies. This happens by getting as many people actively involved in the discussion as possible, which is difficult to do when one expert is at the front presenting their research to everyone else, like at a traditional conference.
- Speakers need to be well briefed. Their purpose is to stimulate discussion around open problems and potential projects. Crucially, they need to share these projects, and the potential successes, with others interested to work with them. Encourage the speakers to participate in the whole event. They should be available to answer questions and join in with a group.

- Give careful thought to how groups will be organised and managed. Groups must be small enough not to be intimidating and feature a mixture of career stages. Group discussions should have guidelines set to ensure nobody dominates the conversation and everyone has a chance to contribute. Sometimes this may entail asking the more confident personalities to keep themselves in check and encourage others to add to the discussion.
- It can help to have someone (or some people) around to ensure that everything is running smoothly. People will have questions (from whether they can have all the email addresses of the participants, to where they should go for dinner that evening) and if you – the academic lead organiser – want to join a group, you might not want to have to answer all those questions yourself!
- Think about the experience of who is attending. Can they all access the room? Do they have dietary requirements? Should you include pronouns on the name badges?
- Include plenty of opportunity for people to ask questions at the end of talks and during group breakout sessions between talks.
- Think flexibly – be prepared to change how things are delivered based on participant feedback. For example, allow a breakout session to run for longer than planned if needed.

"I didn't really know what to expect coming into the process. The collaboration, in depth over three days, was great. Spending that amount of time in the room with the same people has led to deeper relationships and shared values."

Jon Usher, Sustrans, Beyond the Car Incubator.

What happens at an Incubator?

Incubators kick off with speakers presenting **overviews of open problems** or challenges to participants. Ideally these participants represent people from across academic career stages (early career to professor) with different research interests and experiences. After every two or three talks there is a **structured breakout session**, where pre-assigned groups discuss what they have just seen to clarify and brainstorm initial ideas.

The main thrust should be the formation of small (usually 4-8 people) teams bringing together mixed experience and expertise. These teams should be mostly self-selecting and will explore formulating approaches to address the challenges. Some intervention may be needed from organisers to ensure that teams are not too big or small and have a mix of experience. Teams can develop different approaches to the same challenge and sometimes team members may move between two or three teams.

Most of the rest of the workshop (usually around half the available time) is then set aside for this **unstructured teamwork**. This approach allows participants to explore and refine approaches without the pressure of working to an immediate deadline. When substantial time is dedicated to the development of ideas, they are more likely to lead to tangible results following the incubator.

The schedule opposite is a suggestion for how an incubator lasting 5 days could be run. It is possible to run an incubator over 3 full days by reducing the number of speakers and aiming to complete Stage 1 and possibly Stage 2 on the first day so that there is still a large proportion of time spent working on the problems in teams.

A five day incubator from start to finish.

Day	Five-day incubator	Stage
Day 1	Registration Welcome talk Short talks followed by group discussion Feedback ideas (Fit in an icebreaker or lightning talks if there is time)	Stage 1 – Understanding Challenges (and meeting other participants)
Day 2	Presentation of open problems Group discussion and feedback Lightning talks Clustering of ideas Team formation Evening Social event	Stage 2 – Team Formation
Day 3	Confirm teams and review teamworking guidelines. Collaborative teamwork	Stage 3 – Problem Development (Teams generally set their own schedule)
Day 4	Brief update on progress from the teams Collaborative teamwork Social event	
Day 5	Recap Presentation preparation Team presentations Next steps and wrap-up	
		Stage 4 – Team Presentations
		Stage 5 – Wrap-up and Next Steps

Welcome talk

This is the opportunity for you to set the tone for the event, make participants feel welcome and instil an inclusive and open atmosphere. Take time to go over the format for the incubator and let people know what will be happening day to day. This is a good time to review as a group the expectations of how people will work together.

Stage 1 – Understanding the Open Problems

The first part of the incubator is spent understanding the nature of the open problems. Allow speakers around 20 minutes to present their challenges and follow this with a short time for questions and answers with the whole workshop. Aim for 5-8 speakers and make sure they are well briefed on how their presentation should be pitched.

Divide the talks into a few short sessions and after each session ask participants to discuss what was presented in small groups of 6-8 people. Allocate participants to these groups before the incubator to ensure there is a diverse mix of people in each group (i.e. across career stage, expertise and personal characteristics – gender, ethnicity etc). The group discussion should identify areas of interest that could be developed in a more in-depth way during the rest of the event.

Ask participants to:

- Introduce themselves to the other people in their group.
- Clarify anything they haven't understood - ideally the speakers will be available to answer questions that arise.
- Capture (on post-it-notes) ideas and questions relating to the problems that warrant further discussion during this week.
- Feed these ideas back to the workshop in a plenary session.

Consider asking the group to agree a chair (or you may want to nominate someone in advance) who helps keep the discussion on track and gives everyone an opportunity to contribute. Groups may also want to nominate a scribe to record the outputs of the discussion.

Stage 2 - Team Formation

Once the challenges have all been presented and the groups have shared their ideas with the workshop, the next task is to cluster these ideas into themes with an aim of identifying research questions/topics that have the potential to be explored in working teams for the remainder of the workshop. This can take time, and you may want to identify experienced colleagues to help and do it over lunch or at the end of the day.

Present these questions/topics back to the workshop and invite participants to decide on which one they are interested in exploring. This can be done by writing their name on a post-it note and adding it to the team that they want to join. Allow time so that people can reflect on what they have heard. Ideally everyone will get to work on something that they are interested in, but you might need to do some negotiating to make sure teams are of a sensible size (4-8 people is about right) and have a good balance between senior and less experienced participants.

Stage 3 – Problem Development

Much of the remainder of the workshop will be spent working in these teams to explore and develop the problems. Teams can to some extent set their own schedule although we recommend you provide coffee and lunch breaks at regular times to enable effective networking and discussion between teams.

'It feels scary but having substantial empty space for teamwork in your incubator is essential – this allows participants to start truly collaborative research and generate exciting and novel ideas, with the motivation to keep working together beyond the incubator.' Matt Roberts, University of Bath

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It is helpful to have at least one member of the organising committee available during the event to keep an eye on the teams and to be approachable if participants have problems or concerns, or if they just feel like they're not contributing. Teams can lose focus, get stuck on a problem, or end up with different opinions on an approach. Sometimes a small intervention is needed to get things back on track.

Stage 4 – Team Presentations

Include a session at the end of the incubator to bring the teams back together to present their findings. Encourage the whole team to take part in designing the preparation and possibly the delivery too. Try to keep this session informal and open so that people feel confident to present their findings, even if they are only preliminary suggestions or negative findings ("this approach didn't work" etc).

Stage 5 – Wrap up and Next Steps

Think about how you want to close the event – you may want to summarise what has happened, identify some highlights and provide an opportunity for people to share their thoughts. This session could include a discussion on:

- How do people want to continue with the collaboration?
- What are the potential routes to take the work forward?
- How have people found the workshop? Ask for feedback, in person and though forms.

And finally, remember to thank people for making the time to participate in the workshop!

Extras: Lightning Talks

If time allows, include a couple of sessions for participants to say something about themselves and their research interests, and encourage everyone to take part. This helps participants find out about the other people at the incubator and what expertise is in the room that they may want to draw on. Bear in mind that this can be daunting so make the session informal (it is not an opportunity to show off) and strictly time limited. If there isn't time, ask participants to send in a 'bio' slide before the workshop which includes a photo and summary of research interests.

Extras: Touch Points

If the unstructured teamwork is running over more than 2 days (as we recommend!) then it may be useful to have an extra short session at the beginning / end of each day to allow each team to give a brief update on their progress so far and what they are planning to do next.

Planning an incubator

A successful incubator has an exciting research theme that enables people to work together. Interdisciplinary events work well because most people will be a little outside of their specialist area, which levels the playing field: a PhD student from one subject can explain something to a professor from another. The focus is on forming connections and finding common ground, rather than the technical details of one field or another.

Participants should experience the incubator as a free-flowing, open event which encourages collaborative discussion. Achieving this requires planning and organisation before and during the event, and we recommend starting this **at least 4 months – and ideally 6 months – in advance**. An indicative planning timeline is included on the next page.

Ideally there will be at least two people involved in the organisation: one academic lead to develop the content and structure of the event, and administrative support to help with catering, room bookings, travel and accommodation for participants etc. These administrative tasks can be time consuming but are important to get right. You may also want to bring in some PhD students or postdocs to help organise and deliver the event. It will be good experience for them and help share the workload. If the incubator is inter-disciplinary, it helps to have academics from each of the disciplines on the organising team.

"It was a fantastic event which opened so many doors for the Royal United Hospital to collaborate more than we otherwise might. Personally, the event provided a perfect platform to meet and interact with key individuals on a level playing field."
Cris Fletcher, RUH, Beyond the Car Incubator.

- **Venue** - Is it accessible? How is the room laid out? What does the space feel like? Avoid using large lecture theatres as this can reinforce hierarchies (student/teacher) and make it feel more like a traditional conference. Ideally find a light open space that people will enjoy spending multiple days in. Having separate break out rooms is ideal if possible.
- **Catering** - Good quality, regular and reliable catering makes all the difference and can really keep people motivated. It is worth putting time (and money if you have it) into finding a good caterer for your event. Having a constant supply of coffee and refreshments also helps drive productivity – both through providing energy and encouraging ad hoc chats.
- **Expectations** - Be clear with your participants, speakers and/or industrial partners about what they can expect to get out of the workshop and the likely outputs. Conversely, make your expectations of them clear (for example, that they commit to the full event and engage in group discussion and teamworking).
- **Participants** - Think about who is attending, their interests and expertise, and use this to your advantage when planning activities and seating arrangements.
- **Collaborative workspace** - Consider setting up a workspace for the incubator (Slack, Teams etc.) as a way of communicating with participants before, during and after the event. This is a great way of building momentum for the event, sharing information and encouraging collaborations to last once the workshop has finished.
- **Registration -** Make planning easy by including questions about the following on the registration form: Research interests and/or area of expertise, motivation for attending the incubator, dietary requirements, other requirements i.e. access, childcare etc.

Organising an incubator: timeline

What	When (time before the incubator)	Who
Define the topic/theme for the Incubator	4-6 months before	Academic lead
Identify speakers and confirm availability	4-6 months before	Academic lead
Book the venue - Somewhere with good WiFi - A light and welcoming space where furniture can be arranged in way effective to enable discussion in small groups - Accessibility should be considered	4 months	Administrator (guided by academic lead)
Book catering including: - Coffee etc. on arrival each day - Coffee/breaks during event (or on-tap coffee/refreshments) - Lunches - One (at least) dinner for all participants - Consider sustainability/environment in organising catering (e.g. ask people to bring own mugs to save on disposable cups)	3 months before (provisional bookings can usually be made with numbers and meals confirmed nearer the time)	Administrator
Book accommodation (if required)	3-4 months before (may need longer)	Administrator
Set up an online registration form which includes: • Research interests and/or areas of expertise • Motivation for attending the incubator • Email address • Any other requirements – e.g. dietary, access, childcare etc. • Consent to share information with other participants (a requirement under GDPR)	3 months before	Academic lead with admin
Develop the website/promotional email and advertise the event.	3 months before	Academic lead with administrative support
Develop the initial timetable and event information and share with participants (eventually you may want to have two timetables – one for the organising team with a fair amount of detail and one that only has the broad sessions and key activities for participants)	2 months before	Academic lead

What	When (time before the incubator)	Who
Identify key people who can help during the event (e.g. chairing groups)	6 weeks before	Academic lead
Create guidance for those with specific roles - speakers, group chairs	6 weeks before	Academic lead with administrator
Develop a "behind the scenes" timetable/facilitation plan	Ideally 1 month before	Administrator with academic lead
Gather dietary requirements and confirm with caterers	1 month before	Administrator
Plan ice breaker/team building exercise	2 weeks before	Administrator with academic lead
Organise groups for discussion of challenges	2 weeks before	Academic lead
Get presentations from speakers if possible	3 working days before	Administrator
Create name badges (make sure names and affiliations correctly listed)	1 week before	Administrator
Gather supporting stationery and materials (e.g. paper, pens, sticky notes…)	1 week before	Administrator
Ensure sign-up sheet/plan for registration	1 week before	Administrator
Create feedback form – an online form works best	1 week before	Administrator
Prepare welcome presentation and explanation of event	1 week before	Academic lead
Identify people to follow up with the collaborations and possible routes	By end of event	Academic lead
Request feedback	At end of event	Academic lead with administrator
Collate and review feedback	2-4 weeks after	Administrator with academic lead
Keep an eye on the follow up activity and the outputs it delivers	Ongoing	Academic lead

Code of Conduct

We invite you to this workshop in a spirit of curiosity, friendliness, open-mindedness and respect. We value your participation and want to ensure a welcoming and safe environment for all. In line with XXXX policy, we will not tolerate harassment in any form. All participants at our event are required to agree to the following code of conduct and we expect participants to these rules at the workshop venue, online and at related social events.

Need Help?

If you are being harassed either in person or online, notice that someone else is being harassed, or have any other concerns, please communicate this to one of the organisers or email XXXX

Summary

- Our workshop provides a harassment-free experience for everyone, regardless of gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, age, disability, appearance, race, ethnicity or religion.
- Participants asked to stop any harassing behaviour are expected to comply immediately. Participants violating these rules may, at the discretion of the organisers, be asked to leave the event.

Be aware

Harassment includes the following:

- Offensive verbal or written comments related to gender, gender identity and expression, age, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, race, ethnicity or religion.
- Deliberate intimidation, stalking, invading personal space, harassing photography or recording, sustained disruption of talks or other events.
- Inappropriate physical contact, persistent and unwelcome sexual attention.
- Solicitation of emotional or physical intimacy accompanied by real or implied threat of professional harm, and/or offering professional favours for compliance.

Ideas for effective group working

Make sure everyone introduces themselves – just their name and one sentence about themselves.

Would it help to have a group chair and/or scribe? Who? Consider rotating this responsibility.

Ask lots of questions. There are no stupid questions.

Ideas are good. Start by noting as many ideas as possible, without worrying about feasibility.

Now isn't the time to criticise anyone's ideas, instead suggest an improvement, or another idea.

Is there a connection to another problem/theory/field no one has noticed?

Don't let anyone dominate the discussion (including yourself!).

Look out for anyone who might have something to say but isn't saying it (e.g. because others are talking over them).

If anyone seems left out, talk to them during a break and check they're following and feel involved.

If someone is keeping quiet, can you ask them to contribute something based on their own specialist knowledge? E.g. "Sally, what do you think from a statistician's perspective?"

There is no expert - don't assume that because someone is senior that they have the 'right' answer.

If you are racing ahead of other people in your group, stop and think about how to bring them with you.